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# The Representation of Women and Gender in Warner Bros. Cartoons: A Performance of Satire

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Eliza Wells

The Representation of Women and Gender in Warner Bros. Cartoons:

A Performance of Satire

English 239

Professor Meg Gillette

Winter 2015

Short Analytical

*Did you ever find Bugs Bunny attractive when he put on a dress and played a girl bunny?*

*-WAYNE'S WORLD (1992)*

Although some scholars still propagate the idea that gender is binary, evidence is growing that gender actually exists on a spectrum: that there is a distinct difference between biological sex and behavioral gender, the latter of which is influenced principally by cultural values. This idea, that gender is a sort of performance, shaped and molded to fit the expectations of one's society, is challenging to the ingrained sense of binary gender roles which humans have accepted for generations. We ascribe these gender roles, these neat classifications of masculine and feminine, to nearly everything in our society: symbols (female and male bathroom signs), words (such as passivity versus aggression), colors (pink and blue), and clothing (corsets versus ties). These gender roles are set up in opposition to one another, displayed without the possibility of overlap to maintain clarity. We pass on these absurd binaries to future generations through media, including children's cartoons. A sweepingly popular cartoon for kids of the last generation that appears to display these binaries and stereotypes for gender is the Warner Bros Looney Toons. For example, there are hardly any female characters at all –and the few that there are are presented as flawed: either being asexual, unattractive, and old, such as Granny or Witch Hazel; vulnerable to male sexual harassment, such as Penelope Pussycat; or seductresses, who are typically played by males in drag, or robots built by male characters in order to mislead or distract other characters. This lack of female representation perhaps became so alarming to animators that they later added Babs Bunny and Melissa Duck as counterparts to Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck. The inclusion of these female characters may have had an even more detrimental effect; Rather than having no representation of women, there were now sexualized images of women –with short skirts, red lips, busty bodies, and flirtatious swaggers. Despite

these criticisms about the absence of female characters, which are very legitimate, I argue that ultimately the cartoons show gender as fluid, non-binary and disconnected from biological sex. This is achieved through the use of satire in a number of ways: by challenging the idea of heteronormativity, depicting the absurdity in the objectification and stereotyping of women, and depicting gender as a performance.

In order to put context to the issues I raise about gender, I will begin by explaining the previous issues that have been discussed regarding these cartoons. This series has been the subject of controversy in the last generation primarily due to interpretations of the cartoons as being offensive to certain groups, most notably ethnic and racial groups. For example, we see this in the characterization of a Hispanic mouse by the name of “Speedy Gonzales” who darts about shouting “¡Andale!”, “Arriba!”, and “¡Yii-hah!” while swigging tequila and saving his multitude of siblings. Additionally, there are overly simplified depictions of nationalities such as the French and the German that may be offensive due to their use of stereotypes to allow viewers to quickly identify them, such as exaggerated accents, ways of dress, and personality traits. Another criticism of the cartoons is their presentation of African American characters, who are seen with full lips and heavier bodies, eating watermelon and even picking cotton on plantations, such as in the cartoon “Mississippi Hare” (1949). Perhaps the most upsetting to viewers was in the cartoon “Southern Fried Rabbit” (1953), where Bugs Bunny is dressed as a slave in tattered clothing and dark brown fur and crawls from Yosemite Sam begging “Don’t beat me mastah — please don’t beat me mastah!” Some of these cartoons certainly contain offensive stereotypes and trivializing depictions of very serious issues, such as racism, prejudice, and violence, and need to be viewed with caution and skepticism. These cartoons are a product of their time, and certainly need to be viewed as such, as a snapshot of our culture during times of high racial and

prejudicial tension. New criticisms have been raised regarding the disparity of female characters and the negative depictions of women; although there are hardly any female characters, there are still negative depictions of the female gender role that are presented through males dressing as females.

One argument that has been raised against the presence of binary gender in these cartoons is against the assumption that the main characters are in fact male. I assert that Bugs Bunny is not distinctly male, but of ambiguous gender. Although Bugs Bunny's sex cannot be confirmed, a majority of viewers would stubbornly insist that he or she was male. When prompted to answer why, they might perhaps refer to the lower pitched voice, but more likely, they would come to the conclusion that he was male because he lacks overtly feminine physical features, such as long eyelashes, long hair, long nails, or even makeup, despite the fact that rabbits would not display feminine or masculine physical features besides their private parts. Indeed, as Kevin Sandler explains, Bugs is assumed to be male unless proven female (*Reading the Rabbit*). Similarly, although Bugs' sexual preferences and gender cannot be confirmed, a majority of viewers would yet insist that he or she was heterosexual, despite the fact that Bugs frequently dresses in feminine clothing, kisses male characters, and disguises himself as a female, performing the female gender role through blushing, batting his eyelashes, and dancing provocatively. In fact, it is not even just Bugs who participates in cross-dressing and behavior of the opposite gender role — other characters such as Daffy Duck, Porky Pig, Elmer Fudd, Wile E. Coyote, Sylvester Cat, and other minor characters do so as well. A full list of incidents where characters perceived by viewers to be male participate in female dress and behavior was made by Karen Anne Taylor, a cross-dressing male who seeks to enlighten others about transgenderism. Indeed, this assumption of maleness from heterosexual gender roles, despite a multitude of incidents of female behavior

and dress, can be explained through the theory of heteronormativity: the view that heterosexuality is the default sexuality, and anything that departs from this is an exception. Viewers who come from this generation of heteronormativity find comfort in "...a heterosexual matrix based on the mutual exclusivity of gender, desire, and sex", so much so that they will see it even where it does not follow that it exists (Sandler, *Writing the Rabbit* 155). The assumption that Bugs Bunny, along with other traditional "male" characters, are males of heterosexual desire and masculine gender is a product of heteronormativity. The sheer number of incidents in these cartoons involving cross-dressing and cross-gender behaviors make a statement, perhaps one that indicates that Warner Bros. was attempting to break free of this ideology — to show the fluidity of gender and its disconnect from biological sex. This is an extremely progressive goal, even if it was not understood at the time, given the contemporary lack of acceptance of non-binary gender roles and transsexuality.

Despite the above ambiguities, ultimately we must still question why there is such a lack of obviously female characters in Warner Bros. cartoons, and why the few depictions of women that there are objectify them and conform to stereotypes. On one hand, the lack of representation of women can lead female viewers to feel forced to identify solely with male characters, especially when characters such as Granny and Witch Hazel are portrayed in such a negative light: aggressive, overly harsh, ugly, or cruel. Granny is nearly always pictured with a broomstick or some other blunt object, beating and howling at Sylvester for some transgression. Witch Hazel, similarly, is also often shown with a broomstick, given that she is an actual witch. She takes pride in her unattractive appearance, striving to be the ugliest witch in all of the land. In "Broomstick Bunny" (1956), Hazel becomes horrified when she is turned into a beautiful redheaded woman, with long legs and visible cleavage. She is hollered at by the man in the

mirror whom she had previously turned to for reassurance in her ugliness, and runs from him in distress. This could perhaps be viewed as a positive depiction of Hazel — that she wishes to avoid this unwanted attention from men — but must a woman remain ugly and modest simply to avoid sexual harassment? Perhaps this is a criticism of the patriarchy Warner Bros. was attempting to convey. Another potentially negative image of women is created by dressing male characters as females, which are often used as devices of disguise and trickery in the chase gags. This can imply that women are all tricksters, leading men astray with their long eyelashes, red lips, long dresses, and curvy bodies, which are all over-exaggerated. For example, in “Rabbit Seasoning” (1952), Bugs fools Elmer Fudd into believing he is a beautiful huntress, clearly playing on flirtatious femininity to get himself out of trouble when, after shooting Elmer, he approaches him and says “did I hurt you with my naughty gun?” Bugs dressed in blonde curls and red lipstick. Elmer is mesmerized by this simple disguise which, although very stereotypically feminine, is so transparently obvious to the audience that it depicts Elmer as naïve for believing it. Elmer only realizes this as a disguise when one of Bugs’ ears slips out of his red cap. Rather than making the character who is dressed as a female the focus of laughter and ridicule, this directs the joke at Elmer, representing men as too easily fooled by feminine charms. Thus, these stereotypes do not in fact demean women, instead targeting the men who fall for them and take them as an image of a true, real woman. By building feminine disguises that are convincing to other characters in the cartoon but appear obvious and comical to the outside audience, these cartoons knock down this phony, flamboyant femininity, as well as give the message to the female audience that these stereotypes can be used for their own gain, liberation, and advancement. As mentioned previously, nearly all of the main characters in these cartoons rely on the innocent and feminine stereotype to escape capture. Similarly, in several episodes

male characters fall for mechanical female characters who lead them into danger without a second thought. This clearly displays women as tricksters who dilute male logic; however, since they are mechanical, it is the male character who the audience is directed to criticize. Once again, it is the naïve male character and his inability to see through these faulty disguises and constructed female images who is the butt of the joke. For example, in “The Hair Raising Hare” (1946), Bugs is lured after a female mechanical rabbit as soon as it teeters past his hole. The mechanical rabbit has a clear winding mechanism on its back, but Bugs follows it without concern, right up into the overcast hills into a cave marked “Evil Scientist”. Indeed, these cartoons in fact criticize men for believing in these ridiculous stereotypes in addition to teaching women that they can use them for their own gain.

I also argue that Warner Bros. cartoons satirize these depictions of women and the oppressive roles women are forced into, most especially through Bugs Bunny, who, if not the object of desire “or site of sexuality... is elderly, motherly, unattractive, or desexualized like Granny or Witch Hazel” (Sandler, *Reading the Rabbit* 162). Bugs Bunny, in his constant feminine drag and feminine performances, falls victim to these stereotypes and gender roles as well, and he either sympathizes with female viewers, or uses the stereotypes to his advantage to outsmart the sexist male characters. For example, in “Backwoods Bunny” (1959), Bugs dresses as a female buzzard to escape the pursuit of Elvis the Buzzard, who hoots and hollers at Bugs and continually harasses him. Or, in “Rabbit Season” (1951), where Bugs dresses as a woman to escape Elmer Fudd and uses this disguise along with obvious (at least to the outside audience) flirting to turn him against Daffy, a strategy he uses countless other times throughout the series. Indeed, although it can be argued that the lack of female characters and their negative characterizations can lead to immasculation, I argue that it is actually a satirization of female gender roles and



male naivety. Similarly, the objectification of women in these characters is a clear satire — the female physical form and gender characteristics are overly exaggerated and nearly always applied to male characters, causing them to appear absurd and trivial. Even the male characters themselves call attention to the absurdity of the objectification. For example, in “The Big Snooze” (1946), Bugs puts a green dress, heels, red lipstick, and a long red wig on Elmer Fudd, who is then chased on the street corner by howling wolves dressed like men in caps and ties. He looks at the audience and says, “Goodness gracious! Have any of you girls ever had an experience like this?” This is a blatant representation and satirization of the objectification and harassment that women encounter in society and it is put on display in an overt, exaggerated fashion, specifically to show its absurdity. Indeed, rather than causing immasculation, the lack of female characters in these cartoons satirizes the ideal woman stereotype and puts sexist men on the spot for ridicule.

This constant cross-dressing of male characters in Warner Bros. Cartoons also alludes to the idea of gender as a performance. In nearly every episode, characters including Bugs Bunny, Elmer Fudd, Daffy Duck, and Wile E. Coyote dress femininely, wearing skirts, long hair, makeup, and heels (Taylor). Although their sex is male, all it takes is these outward physical and behavioral changes to convince other characters that they are female, which makes gender seem trivial and impermanent, like clothing and makeup that can be put on and taken off. For example, by dressing Elmer, a male character, in feminine clothing, long hair, and makeup and having other male characters buy into his being female, the makers of the cartoon display the absurdity of this idea of gender and sex being intertwined. Additionally, gender is depicted as even more trivial and impermanent in episodes such as “Rabbit of Seville” (1949), where characters perform more than one gender and sex in the same episode. Bugs dresses as a temptress to elude

Elmer, refers to himself as Elmer's "little señorit-er" and dances about him, seductively cutting his pants off. These actions depict Bugs as female both in gender and sex. Later on in the episode, however, in the midst of a chase scene, Bugs trades weapons for flowers, chocolates, and a ring, and proposes to Elmer. This is an apparent change in gender from female to male, according to our cultural norms regarding marriage. In response, Elmer reappears in the scene fully clad as a blushing bride. Bugs then carries Elmer up a set of stairs and drops him into a large wedding cake. Here we see the triviality of gender roles in these cartoons: Bugs and Elmer can change their gender within a second. By depicting gender as trivial, Warner Bros. cartoons may have been attempting to show not only that gender roles are constructed and of little importance, but that any individual can be any gender of their choosing, depending on the context. Through cross dressing, the makers of the cartoon enact a criticism of gender roles as well as cultural gender norms.

Warner Bros. cartoons satirize the idea that gender, biological sex, and sexuality are intertwined through challenging the idea of heteronormativity, depicting the objectification and stereotyping of women as absurd, and depicting gender as a performance. Several of the male characters in the cartoon perform feminine gender roles as well as male ones, making gender seem trivial. Additionally, female characters are depicted in a negative light only for the purposes of satire, and the ideal female image (usually worn by males, but also shown as mechanical), is used to criticize sexist males who are blinded by their unrealistic standards and ideas about women. Although some may argue that humor can be trivializing to these real social issues, such as racial and gender stereotypes, I assert that it is a crucial mechanism in dealing with the severity and sensitivity of these issues. Only through satire can these issues be addressed in cultural contexts in which they are of such high sensitivity. Although there is a great deal of

controversy surrounding Warner Bros. cartoons regarding their depiction of different races, nationalities, religions, and genders, it should be admired that the creators of these cartoons went to such lengths to attempt to be representative of the great amount of diversity in the world. Rather than showing a safe, uniform depiction of people, they chose the riskier option more likely to be criticized — to depict people as individuals, distinct and diverse, which is nearly impossible to do without addressing the stereotypes and cultural boundaries that we confront internationally through the generations.

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